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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR VISITS JOLO TO HIGHLIGHT ASSISTANCE

¶1. SUMMARY. The Ambassador and senior Embassy officials focused attention on U.S. assistance programs with a visit to Jolo Island in Mindanao's Sulu Province. The highlight was the inauguration of the Jolo Consumers' Cooperative rebuilt through the combined efforts of members of the Armed Forces of the Philippines and U.S. military. The ceremony took place on the one year anniversary of its bombing by terrorists. Local officials and residents enthusiastically welcomed the delegation as well as ongoing and future assistance programs. Local and national media covered each event extensively, and the trip was featured on two major Philippine television networks that evening. End Summary.

Back to Jolo

¶2. On March 27, the Ambassador again traveled to Jolo Island in Mindanao's Sulu Province to meet with local officials and view the progress and benefits of several projects supported by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines (JSOTF-P). USAID Mission Director, Acting JUSMAG Chief, and Commander, JSOTF-P, accompanied the Ambassador. The southern region of Mindanao, where Sulu is located, has been the base of the terrorist Abu Sayyaf Group and Jemaah Islamiyah, both affiliated with Al-Qaeda and both on the U.S. Government's list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations.

Improving Rule of Law

¶3. At the Regional Trial Court of Sulu in Jolo Town, the Ambassador presided over the transfer of equipment valued in excess of US\$33,000, including tables, chairs, file cabinets, computers, and fax machines. This equipment is part of a larger US\$150,000 USAID-funded effort to upgrade the facilities of all 14 Regional Trial Courts of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), where Jolo is located. USAID had in November 2006 already turned over books and reference materials to the Executive Judges representing the ARMM Regional Trial Courts. Joining the ceremony were a Presiding Judge of Sulu Regional Trial Court and Executive Judge of Shariah Courts, the Provincial Prosecutor, the District Attorney, and Trial Court personnel. In her remarks, the Ambassador stressed the importance of having a well functioning judicial system and the necessity of ensuring the fair administration of justice to all citizens. Both the Presiding Judge and Provincial Prosecutor expressed deep gratitude for the assistance provided, and noted remaining needs.

Lighting up

¶4. A separate ceremony at the Capitol Building in Jolo Town highlighted USAID's provision of solar powered electricity in various locations throughout the Province of Sulu. Since 2002, USAID's Alliance for Mindanao Off-Grid Renewable Energy (AMORE) Project has provided renewable energy (solar or micro-hydro) to 319 villages in Mindanao. Among other private sector supporters, Mirant

Philippines Corporation has provided US \$4 million towards the project. Nearly 1,500 additional families in Sulu now have electric power. Additionally, nine schools have received electricity to permit them to access distance learning programs, 34 electric street lights have been installed, and 17 community centers provided with electric power. Another 39 Sulu villages will be electrified by May 2007, taking the total for the province to 88.

15. After the Ambassador symbolically "switched on" the power, the Governor of Sulu offered his thanks to all the contributing partners for the project. A child read a letter describing how electrification had improved her life, enabling her to study more and become a better student. The Ambassador emphasized that the electrification program lays a foundation for the future for all the families that live in Sulu - a future that rejects terrorism and that seeks opportunities to grow and prosper in an environment of peace and security.

Staying in school

16. At Sulu National High School in Jolo, the Ambassador met with educators and presided over the transfer of equipment worth US\$10,500. An enthusiastic crowd of more than 1,000 students, parents and teachers greeted her. The program highlighted USAID's Education Quality and Access for Learning and Livelihood Skills Program (EQuALLS), which provides educational assistance to municipalities in Sulu Province (and elsewhere in Mindanao).

17. With the assistance of another local partner, the Education & Livelihood Skills Alliance, USAID also helps provide infrastructure improvements, school construction assistance, and the provision of school supplies including desks, textbooks, and reference materials.

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This project develops various trade skills such as baking/cooking, carpentry, dressmaking, fish processing, and welding. Given that less than half of all local high school students are expected to attend college, the program provides training to enable the youths to acquire skills needed to engage in productive work after high school. The Ambassador cited the importance of developing necessary skills to pursue a vocation, and offered encouragement to all to continue their efforts and education. She also conducted a live radio interview on the site with two local stations.

Rebuilding from the ashes

18. At the Sulu Consumers' Cooperative, site of a deadly March 2006 terrorist bombing, the Ambassador joined Philippine Western Mindanao Commander General Eugenio Cedo and Commander, Task Force Comet, General Ruben Rafael, 3P Foundation USA Chairman Armando De Rossi, numerous local government and military officials, and members of JSOTF-P, which had provided reconstruction assistance. A survivor of the bombing thanked the USG for the medical treatment he had received for burn wounds from the U.S. Navy hospital ship Mercy. The Ambassador praised the citizens for their collective will and successful efforts to reestablish the market, and highlighted that it sent a resoundingly clear message that terrorism and those who seek to destroy innocent lives will not prevail. The participants then unveiled two monuments dedicated to those who lost their lives during the bombing.

19. COMMENT. The warmth and enthusiasm of local residents was a moving demonstration of the desire of the local population for peace and against terrorism. The work of USAID and JSOTF-P, together with their civilian and military partners, has given the population of the Province of Sulu a taste of life without terrorism, effectively reclaiming the area from the terrorists operating there. Such programs remain the key to continuing to isolate the population from the terrorists.

KENNEY